They recognised that terrorists and criminals in either country need to be given swift and effective punishment. The two sides agreed to release by August 14-15, 2007, those prisoners who have been granted consular access, whose national status has been verified and who have completed their prison sentences. To this end, they agreed that immediate steps will be taken by either side to reconcile their numbers to facilitate their early release on completion of necessary formalities. The two sides also agreed to release by August 14-15, 2007 the remaining fishermen in each other's custody on completion of due process. They further decided to take immediate steps to release the fishing boats, excluding trawlers, in each other's custody. Both sides agreed that the recently formed Committee on Prisoners, comprising eminent retired judges from the two countries, will hold two meetings, one in India and the other in Pakistan, within a period of 3 months. Separate working groups discussed in detail the drafts of the revised Visa and Consular Access Agreements aimed at liberalising and making existing provisions more effective. The text of the Agreement on Consular Access has been finalised. Also, they made considerable progress towards early finalisation and signing of the Visa Agreement.

Friendship with Central Asian Republics

1279. KUMARI NIRMALA DESHPANDE: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) the steps that are being taken to strengthen the traditional friendship between India and Central Asian Republics;

(b) whether there are any plans to improve road and rail connectivity; and

(c) if not, the reasons therefor?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) India has close and cordial relations with the Central Asian Republics. There have been regular exchanges of visits at high levels and official meetings including those related to Inter Governmental Commissions, Foreign Office Consultations and Joint Working Groups are held frequently. India and Central Asian countries also enjoy warm people-to-people contacts and there are regular academic and cultural exchanges. Trade volumes are increasing and Government of India has undertaken developmental projects in fields such as Information Technology, food processing and hydro-electricity. Additionally, Central Asian nationals have availed of scholarships under the Indian Technical Economic Cooperation (ITEC) and other programmes for training or studies in India.

(b) and (c) Direct road and rail connections between India and Central Asia are not immediately possible due to difficulties related to terrain and transit. However, India is working under the framework of the International North South Transport Corridor project to improve surface connectivity to countries in Central Asia.